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ABSTRACT

The first true English dictionary was Robert Cawdrey's "A Table Alphabeticall," published in 1604. Cawdrey's book may be seen as the result of a number of dramatic events that had occurred in the century and a quarter that preceeded it, including the widespread use of the Gutenberg press. Printing became so much easier and cheaper that it became feasible not only to publish works of significance, but also to undertake writings of lesser consequence as well. The status of the English language also underwent a change. As the sixteenth century wore on, many original English writings as well as translations from various other languages became increasingly available. The Protestant Reformation also led to the adoption of English in the place of Latin in official church services. As a consequence of world-wide exploration and colonial expansion and the rising status of women, there was an increasing need to explain words to these new populations. Cawdrey's book was produced for the benefit of these audiences in order to help them understand many hard English words. Borrowing from available compilations, Cawdrey filled out and broadened their definitions and doubled the number of entries. In much the same manner, the dictionaries that followed Cawdrey's pulled together and enlarged upon earlier compilations. By the eighteenth century, the motley collection of hard words had evolved into a much more inclusive, elaborately defined compilation that acquired great authority--an authority that even today has not diminished. (HOD)

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EARLY ENGLISH DICTIONARIES IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New York State Reading Association, Kiamesha Lake, New York, November 2-5, 1982.

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The uses of English dictionaries in reading and reading instruction are too familiar to this audience to require any discussion of the general relevance of the topic to us here today. Two very recent publishing events, however, one a project of the International Reading Association and the other a reprint by a commercial publisher, make this an especially propitious time for us to engage in some scrutiny of dictionaries--their histories and the traditions that provide powerful structures for their production and acceptance. The International Reading Association event is the publication of A Dictionary of Reading and Related Terms,[12] under the coeditorship of Theodore L. Harris and Richard E. Hodges. The other event is the reprinting by Arno Press of Samuel Johnson's masterwork, A Dictionary of the English Language,[15] first published in 1755.

The particular reasons for each production at this time may differ greatly, but both are consonant with an interest in the gathering and conserving of words and in the locating of authoritative statements about word forms and meanings, an interest that is clearly discernible in our society at this time. Another obvious example of such current interest is William Safire's syndicated column called "On Language." This column, which offers a conservative layman's view of English words and other language forms, has been the lead article in the New York Times Magazine each Sunday since February 16, 1979. It is hard to imagine such a journalistic decision being made in the late 1960s--only a decade earlier.

It is not my intention now to examine the current interest, however, but to alert the audience to its existence and to connect it with the climate that led to the first flowering of English dictionaries back in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The first true English dictionary was Robert Cawdrey's A Table Alphabeticall,[6] published at the very start of the seventeenth century, in 1604. While various kinds of word listings and compilations, as well as interlingual (or translation) dictionaries had existed for hundreds of years before that date, there had never been a work, such as his, that consisted solely of English words, listed alphabetically, and defined by other English words.[21]

Cawdrey's book, rooted in a host of varied other compilations, may be seen as the result of a number of dramatic events that had occurred in the century and a quarter that preceded it. That is to say, by the very end of the sixteenth century, the social, political, economic, and religious circumstances in the English-speaking world resulted in a need for the kind of reference tool we find so useful today, a need that had not been felt with any discernible force before then. What events and changes are related to the rise of the English dictionary?

First of all, back in 1450, that lovely man, Johann Gutenberg, had perfected a machine for moving type, and the wealth of printed material that followed helped greatly in the spread of literacy throughout Europe--including England. In England, William Caxton came home from Belgium and set up the first printing press in that country, in Westminster Abbey, in 1476. Caxton, a worldly cloth merchant and semi-official English ambassador-at-large, was enthusiastic about

the printing press he had mastered on the continent.

According to Caxton, he had decided in Belgium to study printing, then an infant craft, for a pressing immediate need: He had done such a fine job on translating a group of French stories about the history of Troy for Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy, that he had received a number of requests for his laboriously handwritten original and thought that printing would be a good way to provide them.[22] Thus, Caxton's translation, Recuyell of the Histories of Troy (1474 - 75) was the first printed English book. On English soil, Caxton went on to publish many distinguished works in English, both translations and native English writings: Canterbury Tales, for example, and Thomas Malory's Morte d'Arthur.

To Caxton's printings were soon added a multitude of publications by contemporary and subsequent English printers of the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries. In pre-printing days, when each book had been individually handwritten, the choice of which book to produce was understandably determined by the stature of the works, and so prestigious Latin works had been preferred. Printing, however, was so much easier and cheaper that it now became feasible to publish not only works of significance and great intrinsic merit, but to undertake writings of lesser consequence as well.

The English language had had particularly low status for several centuries, since the Norman Conquest in 1066, when French became the prestige vernacular language in England. Although gradually, as England and France separated politically, the status of the English language went up as that of French went down, the greatest status

remained with Latin, the international language of religion and scholarship--the two were practically synonymous in Christian Europe for most of the years between the fall of Rome and the 14th century Renaissance. In England, which lagged behind the continent in being open to the influence of the Renaissance, the status of English also lagged behind. As late as 1531, Sir Thomas Elyot, a humanist scholar and lexicographer advocated, in his Boke named the Gouvernour, that a nobleman's son should be surrounded from infancy by those who would "accustom him by little and little to speak pure and elegant Latin."[10] In fact, writings in English remained controversial through the first half of the sixteenth century.

As the sixteenth century wore on, however, attitudes toward English changed, and many original English writings as well as translations from various other languages became increasingly available. The vocabulary used in such newly produced English language works was set down by those who had studied under traditions still heavily influenced by the Latin scholarship of pre-printing days. The new English works, therefore, included many words that had been borrowed from foreign languages and that were not familiar to new populations of readers of English who had not themselves studied extensively under that Latin tradition. Such new reader populations, which came into existence during the century after Caxton's first printing, were derived from several sources.

One source was the Protestant Reformation, which started and became fairly well entrenched during the sixteenth century reign of Henry VIII and his daughter, Elizabeth I. One aspect of the Reformation was the adoption of English in the place of Latin in

official church services, leading to the increased importance of English. Moreover, in the interest of advancing the new religious doctrines, an enormous number of theological writings in English appeared, a quantity made possible by the existence of printing. These added to the great variety of other books that burst forth during the first half of the sixteenth century. As a result, 54 different books were published in the year 1500; by 1557, more than 5,000 different books had been produced. They were sold in book shops, at fairs, and were busily hawked about by peddlers at least as early as 1521.[9]

Another result of the Reformation was the dissolution of the convents and the monasteries. Church services and congregational functions now became fully open to women--some sects were soon to give women equal status. Moreover, without the educational structure of convents, women were now part of a general population that was served by a teeming educational establishment and that read the new theological and other English writings.[9]

Another extraordinary circumstance of sixteenth century England was a busy world-wide exploration and colonial expansion, and the commerce connected with it. This helped the rise of a commercial class, whose members lacked the fulltime religious commitment of the scholars of the past, but who were interested in secular knowledge and information. Members of that class added to the numbers of readers of English. In addition, there was much travel and communication with foreigners to whom English was an unfamiliar tongue and who had been exposed mainly to relatively simple vocabulary. To such foreigners were added refugees who fled to England from struggles

to establish the Reformation in various countries on the continent.

Thus, the early dictionaries--Cawdrey's and those that followed his--were developed to meet the need to explain words that those new populations were meeting in the books they read as well as in the sermons they were hearing. Making the vocabulary in the books even harder was the fact that a sixteenth century literary practice of coining elaborate words (called inkhorn terms) had infused English writings with an even greater number of hard words.

There were so many difficult words that in the year 1582, Richard Mulcaster, an eminent and influential educator and student of language, sounded a call for an English dictionary, stating:

"It were a thing very praiseworthy in my opinion, and no less profitable than praiseworthy, if someone well learned and as laborious a man, would gather all the words which we use in our English tongue, whether natural or incorporate [that is, coined], out of all the professions, as well learned as not, into one dictionary, and besides the right writing, which is incident to the alphabet, would open unto us therein, both their natural force and their proper use." (P. 116 - Elementarie)

The first clear answer to that call was Robert Cawdrey's A Table Alphabeticall. Cawdrey's book, produced "for the benefit & helpe of Ladies, Gentlewomen, or any other unskilful persons,"[6] contained 2,500 words that Cawdrey defined as "hard and usual." By this he seemed to mean words that were foreign in origin, and indeed, using simple markings, Cawdrey indicated whether a word is derived from Latin, Greek, or French.

Among Cawdrey's stated purposes was to help his readers "more

easily and better understand many hard English words, which they shall heare or read in Scriptures, Sermons, or elsewhere, and also be made to use the same aptly themselves."[6] These purposes are related to the circumstances produced by the Reformation, namely, the proliferation of both spoken and written English in religion, and the greater acceptance and participation of women in religious matters as wel as in general literacy. The grouping of women with "unskilful persons" is not unusual--others of the day less tactfully pointed out the poor quality of women's scholarship.[24]

In addition to women and unskillful persons, Cawdrey saw as his audience upper class foreigners, whom he refers to as "right honorable and worshipful strangers,"[6] who would benefit not only from his definitions and the information about derivations, but from "the true orthography, that is, the true writing of many hard English words."[6]

Furthermore, indicating that the goal of early Latin for young children expressed by Elyot and mentioned here earlier had not been lost, Cawdrey wrote that through his work "children may heerby be prepared for the understanding of a great number of Latine words."[6]

I said earlier that Cawdrey's compilation had its origins in prior works. While the first known type of dictionary of any kind was apparently a Homeric glossary compiled by Apollonius the Sophist in the first century A.D., the roots of the English dictionary may perhaps best be found in an exceedingly popular Graeco-Latin schoolbook of about 200 A.D., called Hermeneumata pseudo-Dositheana, which listed Greek words and their Latin equivalents.[18] Various forms of this interlingual listing were copied down through the centuries, with metamorphoses of the basic concept, but all were translations from one language

to another. Thus, a range of glossaries, vocabularies, foreign language teaching manuals, and interlingual dictionaries were compiled. For many years, the language translated was confined to Latin or, where Irish scholarship was found, to Greek as well. In the sixteenth century, however, a large number of modern language interlingual dictionaries appeared, stimulated to a large extent by the world-wide expansion and commerce noted earlier.

By Cawdrey's time, therefore, a variety of compilations was available. Among these, two stand out as Cawdrey's immediate sources. One, which seems to have been the prime basis for Cawdrey's book, was a section in Edmund Coote's The English Schoole-Maister of 1596, a language and grammar teaching manual.[8] Coote had also hearkened to Mulcaster's plea for an English dictionary, but only a section of The English Schoole-Maister was devoted to a dictionary-like listing. Coote had listed some 1400 hard words, indicated their derivations, and given a brief definition for about two-thirds of them. Cawdrey seems to have taken this listing, filled out and broadened the definitions, and doubled the number of entries. Most of the new entries and many definitions came from Cawdrey's other major source, namely, a Latin-English dictionary of ca. 1588 compiled by Thomas Thomas.[27]

In much the same manner, the dictionaries that followed Cawdrey's pulled together and enlarged upon earlier compilations. Thus, the maker of the second English dictionary, John Bullokar, based his An English Expositor of 1616 on both Cawdrey's book and that same Latin-English dictionary by Thomas, but doubled the number of entries and indicated the field of knowledge to which technical terms

belonged.[5,27] Then, in 1623, Henry Cockeram borrowed heavily from Bullokar for his three-part work The English Dictionary (the English language work called by that term). In it, Cockeram first lists defines difficult words and, secondly, lists "vulgar" or everyday words and their elegant synonyms. (Thus, to sneeze is to disternute and to pare one's nails is to exungulate). The third part includes, in the manner of the older Latin-English dictionaries, such entries as the names of plants and animals and of mythological or historical figures.

After Cockeram, a chain of ever more elaborate English dictionaries followed in orderly links down through the seventeenth century. One characteristic of that chain that seems amusing, though it must have caused bitter anguish in its time, was that the seventeenth century lexicographers tended to "forget" their sources. That was coupled with a great deal of abuse of each other's works. There was, therefore, much recrimination and ridicule, characterized by accusations of plagiarism and vitriolic exposes of thefts and gross defects, only occasionally relieved by gracious citing of sources.[27]

Yet, the controversies and passions were a sign of the intense interest of the time in words and language, and of the growing pains of a whole new world of scholarship. They may also have been a reflection of the general turmoil that characterized the seventeenth century, which has been termed "a century of revolution."[13] That century began with Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, which was followed by a struggle between the newly-rising, often Puritan middle classes and the autocratic nobility headed by the unpopular Stuart kings. It was the century of the British civil war and the

beheading of Charles I in 1649. The establishment of the Commonwealth by Oliver Cromwell and the Restoration of the monarchy, as well as an on-going war with France all added to the turbulence.

Just as the events of the century before the first English dictionary affected its rise and its form, so did the events of the seventeenth century have an effect on the eighteenth century dictionaries. Thus, the turbulence inspired a desire for order, and the rising middle classes were moved by a desire for authoritative information about correctness of behavior, including language. By the eighteenth century, the English dictionary was ready to incorporate the format and features that would meet those desires. By then, too, the motley collection of hard words had evolved into a much more inclusive, elaborately defined compilation.

From that compilation, talented lexicographers like John Kersey and Nathan Bailey both trimmed and expanded with increasingly scientific scholarship, always building on the work of their predecessors, however. On their work, especially Bailey's, Samuel Johnson built his Dictionary of the English Language of 1755. In response to the spirit of their age, those men brought to the dictionary a high level of order and workmanship, and that age responded gratefully. Enormous numbers of dictionaries were bought during the eighteenth century and dictionaries acquired great authority, an authority that has not diminished. Even today, for most persons, dictionaries and their makers are the final arbiters of meaning, spelling, and pronunciation. This is a role at which modern lexicographers may chafe--and they do--but a role that they cannot at this point, apparently, avoid.

The issues surrounding the authoritative place of dictionaries merit full discussion on their own--discussion that would require more time than we have today. Let it suffice to say that once the dictionary's authority was established, that authority became sturdily entrenched. One can only conclude that dictionaries have been an exceedingly effective answer to a basic need of the on-going culture that has sustained them.

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